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THREE HUNDRED UP

BY GEORGE EDGAR

THE Commander of a German Division was unbending with his staff at the end of a long and unsatisfactory day's work.

By unbending I mean that the German Commander had dined well on foraged food. He had also drunk copiously of stolen champagne. He was pink, noisy, effusive. In civilian attire and in a civilised city an unkind critic would have said the Commander had done himself not wisely and much too well.

His idea of unbending was to back Captain Schultz, notoriously the best billiard-player in Berlin amateur circles, against all comers. And because the Commander was the Commander, had a liver, a peremptory manner, and influence, there were not wanting sycophants amongst the wealthy officers of the Kaiser's Own Guards to back other players and lose their money to General Olgswain in order to propitiate him. Naturally, the General was well on the top of his game, having dined and wined and found his lot cast amongst ambitious young fools prepared cheerfully to back losers.

Twice Captain Schultz had justified his reputation. Literally he cleaned up the floor, in his gentlemanly German way, with such junior officers as were sent up against him.

An orderly entered and stood at the salute.

The Commander only kept him at the salute for ten minutes before noticing the soldier's presence.

"Well," he snapped.

"Escort, sir, with a prisoner," said the orderly. "Case for summary consideration. English officer caught as a spy."

Commander Olgswain's eyes gleamed. "Show them into the office," he deigned.

Then, as the orderly started for the door, he had a happier thought.

"Send the escort and prisoner here," he ordered, correcting his first instructions.

The billiard game went on, and so did the trial of the English officer. The latter claimed to be Lieut. Silverstone, of the London Rifles. He was a short, keen-looking, well-built man, with a clean-shaven, intelligent face and a pair of noticeably steady grey eyes. His voice, when he spoke, was curiously gentle.

He was guilty—guilty beyond doubt. He had been found mapping a gun emplacement. His notes were still in his possession when arrested.

All the same, the trial was a ribald affair. General Olgswain chose to be funny. He heard the evidence and looked on the game at the same time. He made running comments on both. When the evidence had been given he did not offer to hear Silverstone in his own defence.

"Guilty," was his terse verdict. "You will be shot at dawn."

And at that moment Captain Schultz ran to his points against a young lieutenant without exerting himself. The Commander was another £10 to the good.

"Who'll challenge my champion now?" the Commander shouted, jocularly. "I'll back Schultz against anyone in the room to any amount."

Lieutenant Silverstone saluted.

"May I ask a favour?" he said, as his guard waited to escort him to an orderly room.

The Commander, glowing with wine and easy money, regally nodded assent.

"There is no harm in asking," he said, in a heavy, guttural voice. "I may say, we do not give much away to English pigs."

Silverstone flushed.

"I have about one hundred pounds in my possession," he said soberly, "I would like to play your champion, with your permission. I should enjoy a game of billiards on this, my last night on earth. I'll play him 300 level. If I win, I retain my one hundred pounds and am spared my life—that is, instead of being shot I am interned. If I lose, whoever accepts the wager takes my money, and the sentence stands. That is to say, I am wagering £100—nearly all I possess—for a chance of life."

The Commander smiled. He had confidence in Schultz. To agree to the proposal was not good discipline, but the offer was dramatic. Few would know of the incident if he permitted it to take place.

"I agree," he said. "Schultz—I trust to you to see this English dog's life is not in danger of being saved. You win, and we shoot him tomorrow, while I'll take his £100 for regimental purposes."

The elder officers smiled. They knew how tight the Commander could hold on to informal money contributed for regimental purposes.

Schultz was delighted with the opportunity of pleasing his Commander. It never occurred to him that he could lose against a chance Englishman. Schultz, at billiards, was very warm as an amateur—perhaps the best amateur billiard-player in Germany.

The rest of the audience were equally pleased. A man playing for his life on the

billiard-table added a new flavour to the old game, and they were eager to watch the Englishman's deportment with the cue.

The game agreed on was 300 up. Schultz, a bold, flashy man of the club type, settled at once to play his best handicap game. He played the tediously careful game of an experienced performer, bent on winning—the game that becomes a purpose and ceases to be a social amusement.

The English soldier remained as he was when he came in—calm, collected, and studiously civil of manner. He betrayed no consciousness of unusual conditions. He played as if the cost of the table, a whisky-and-soda, and a cigar depended on the result. Also, he played badly.

Schultz, with a gleam in his dark eyes, notched up his first hundred. The condemned man was then only twenty-three.

Silverstone asked for, and received, permission to smoke a cigarette.

Commander Olgswain noisily proclaimed his desire to bet three to one on Schultz—the same odds the Germans were laying on themselves to win the war.

There were no takers. The supply of sycophantic easy money had run dry, or perhaps the peculiar conditions of the game held everyone's attention.

The cigarette did not improve Silverstone's play.

When Schultz, including a break of seventy-four, put up his second hundred Silverstone's score was eighty-one. His best break had been a lucky twenty-eight. He seemed to be playing a dogged, hopeless game against the confident Schultz.

"I'll wager four to one Schultz takes the English pig's head and purse," the Commander said, aloud, challenging the whole room.

His subordinate officers were judiciously silent. The thing looked to them too much like a gift, and they were not ready to bite again.

Lieutenant Silverstone quietly removed his cigarette stump.

"Will you bet with me, sir?" he asked the Commander, politely. "I have a matter of £25 more than the hundred I spoke about. I shall not need the money if I'm to be shot at dawn."

The Commander flushed under the challenge. His pride was wounded. He was also suspicious. And then his colossal vanity got the better of him. He came to the conclusion that the condemned man was trying to curry favour by losing money to him. At least he could teach him the futility of such a course with a German officer.

"Yes," he said, at last, "I'll bet with you. It's your last gamble on earth. I'll lay 100 to your 25 that you lose."

"Thank you, sir," said the captive officer, nodding in a manner of a man accustomed to making bets in public.

Lieutenant Silverstone resumed his cigarette stump and his studied reserve.

Captain Schultz went from 205 to 261 with a nice little break of 56—quite good going for an amateur.

His opponent missed rather an easy losing hazard.

Captain Schultz went to 284 with a neat little break running over twenty.

Lieutenant Silverstone found the balls awkwardly situated. He played a long jenny into the corner left pocket—an almost impossible shot. The red and opponent white ran well down the table into the position professionals set up for a top of the table run. Then for a number of minutes the player simply astounded his little audience of German officers, who were not all without the sporting instinct. He ran from eighty-one with effortless ease, and without varying the series of strokes, to three hundred. As he reached his points he stopped and eyed his audience questioningly.

"That is game," he said, breaking a tense, wondering silence.

"Go on!" said the Commander, carelessly. He had his reputation as a sportsman to maintain. He was stung—stung before his whole staff—but at least he could play the good loser's part. "Go on and finish the break—we are interested."

"Yes—go on," the officers chorused. "Finish the break out."

Schultz, rather crestfallen, noisily placed his cue in the rack. He did not enjoy the turn Silverstone had given the game.

Lieutenant Silverstone went on with the same easy, machine-like confidence.

He carried his break, in the same series of shots, to over 400. Then he opened out the game, and treated his audience to a delightful exhibition of all-round play, including a dainty run of nursery cannons. He miscued a cannon deliberately at exactly 550, and lit another cigarette.

Commander Olgswain paid out the odds he had laid with gracious ostentation, and revised the sentence, according to the terms governing the strange game.

Lieutenant Silverstone drank champagne with the mess, and was ultimately led away by the escort.

He was interned for more than a year, and then reached home in an exchange.

You may see Lieutenant Silverstone, back in civilian life, each afternoon and evening, at the show saloon of Messrs. Dennis and Watson, billiard-table makers, of Trafalgar Square.

He is the youngest of the English professional billiard champions, admittedly the third best billiard-player in the world, and despite a legacy of chronic muscular trouble in one leg, gained in a German prison camp, is expected to improve into our best player with the passage of time.

He plays billiards every day for a living, but admits he has only played the game once for his life.—*The Bystander, London.*